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ABSTRACT

A model for helping classroom teachers understand and evaluate the growth of children in oral and written compositions is presented. The recommended procedure is centered around T-unit analysis. The following sequence is one possible way the T-unit analysis procedure might be used by an elementary school teacher: (1) Divide all the sentences of a pupil's composition into T-units; (2) Divide the total number of words in the composition by the total number of T-units, which will reveal the average length of the pupil's T units; (3) Analyze each sentence in the composition in terms of the number of T-units, number of words per T-unit, ways in which subordination and coordination are indicated, means for the development of characterization, nominals, adverbials and any other measures which affect T-unit length; (4) Prepare a summary outline based on the analysis of sentences including T-unit measures, features of the pupil's syntax, methods utilized for developing characterizations, plot structure analysis, and story interpretation; and (5) Write an evaluation based on the data obtained in steps 1 to 4. This method is illustrated with dictated oral compositions of two grade 1 students. The chief benefit of this procedure is the insights it gives the teacher as to the syntactic performance of his pupils. (Author/DB)

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A New Approach to Understanding Children's Language Development — Analyzing the Syntax of Compositions

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Until very recently classroom teachers have evaluated the growth of children's oral and written composition in terms of mechanics and correctness and their own subjective reactions to the content. Recent research focuses on an objective evaluation of syntax that children use in their oral and written compositions. Hunt (1) and Loban (2), in separate studies of children's language development, found that children's growth in the use of structural variation and expansion is fairly steady throughout the elementary school years. Hunt concluded that the T-unit, one main clause with all the subordinate clauses attached to it, was the best single index for measuring writing maturity. (Hunt defines maturity as the tendency toward characteristics of writers in an older grade.) Loban, searching for a basic unit of expression, arrived at the identical kind of segmentation

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quite independently, calling it a communication unit. Hunt found that the T-unit length was found to be a significantly better indicator in separating pupils of different grade levels than sentence length, subordination ratio, or clause length.

Using the research of Hunt, Leslie Whipp (3), University of Nebraska, developed a model for helping classroom teachers understand and evaluate the growth of children in oral and written compositions. The recommended procedure is centered around T-unit analysis, which has the advantage of preserving all of the subordination achieved by a pupil, and all of his coordination between words and phrases and subordinate clauses. The following sequence is one possible way the T-unit analysis procedure might be used by an elementary school teacher to reveal objective data about the language performance of his pupils:

1. Divide all of the sentences of a pupil's composition into T-units.
2. Divide the total number of words in the composition by the total number of T-units. This will reveal the average length of the pupil's T-units, a very important measure for evaluating composition maturity.
3. Analyze each sentence in the composition in terms of the number of T-units, number of words per T-unit, ways in which subordination and coordination are indicated, means for the development of characterization, nominals, adverbials and any other measures which affect T-unit length.
4. Prepare a summary outline based on the analysis of sentences including T-unit measures, features of the pupil's syntax, methods utilized for developing characterizations, plot structure analysis, and story interpretation.
5. Write an evaluation based on the data obtained in steps one to four. This method of composition analysis has many possible applications which are discussed in the final section of this article. The procedure is illustrated by the following comparative analysis.

In order to show the effectiveness of this method of story analysis, the writer selected dictated oral compositions of two first grade pupils who are at the extreme poles of academic achievement. The two pupils reside in a black ghetto neighborhood of Omaha, Nebraska and at the time their stories were dictated had attended school for one semester.

Pupil Characteristics

Pressly has progressed at a slower rate than average for this class. He is now able to read a few words in a pre-primer. He exhibits a very short attention span for most school activities. He has difficulty in manuscript writing, and his art work also shows some lack of hand coordination. Pressly is one of the shortest boys in his class. He does not lack for friends as he has several good buddies in the room. At times, he is very quarrelsome.

Pressly has five siblings. His favorite outdoor activities are football and basketball; his favorite indoor activity is playing secret agent and throwing bombs. Mannix, To Catch a Thief, Superman and Batman are his television show favorites. Recess is his favorite school activity, and playing hide-go-seek is his least preferred activity.

Mark is making good progress in his academic work, and he is being considered for double promotion. His handwriting and art work show good hand coordination. He is popular with his peers. Mark is one of the tallest boys in the room. He enjoys listening to stories, and he quiets children who interrupt listening activities.

Mark's favorite outdoor activity is playing football; his favorite indoor activities are playing with a two-year-old cousin and playing with his dune buggy. His favorite television programs include Samson and Goliath, The Harlem Globetrotters, The Real Jerry Lewis, and other cartoons. His favorite books are riddle books. Favored family activities include helping his father wash the car, and helping his mother wash dishes.

Pressly dictated the following story after listening to the story, *Let's Be Enemies* by J. Udray and Maurice Sendak. In the story, two friends were reconciled after a quarrel. The children dictated stories about their friends.

Me and My Friend

We took a nap together, and we was friends. And I spent the night. And we played together. And we went outside and played with my puppy and dog. And then I went over to his house, and we painted, and we played ball.

1. We took a nap together, and we was friends.
   (1 sentence; 2 T-units, 9 words, 5 + 4)
   a. Characters identified by pronoun ("we")
   b. Be + Noun Phrase complement
   c. Dialect feature ("we was")
2. And I spent the night. (1; 1; 5)
   a. Use of "and" to begin the sentence

b. Only time reference ("spent the night")

3. And we played together. (1; 1; 4)
   a. "And" in initial position
   b. Characterization by habitual action ("played together")
4. And we went outside and played with my puppy and dog. (1; 1; 11)
   a. Initial "and"
   b. Compound verb
   c. Compound objects in prepositional phrase
   d. Adverbial of place ("outside")
   e. Characterization by habitual action ("played")
   f. Longest T-unit
5. And then I went over to his house, and we painted, and we played ball. (1; 3; 8 + 3 + 4)
   a. Initial "and"
   b. Adverbial of time ("then")
   c. Adverbial of place ("to his house")
   d. Characterization by habitual action

Summary of Composition Characteristics:

1. Lengths
   a. 5 sentences total
   b. 8 T-units total
   c. 44 words
   d. 4.4 words/T-unit average
   e. 3 words/T-unit minimum
   f. 11 words/T-unit maximum
2. Syntax
   a. No occurrence of subordinate clauses
   b. Compounded T-units (and) in 2/5 sentences
   c. Compounded verb phrase (1/5)
   d. No occurrence of adjectives
3. Characterization
   a. Relationships with other persons (friend)
   b. Habitual action (play)
4. Plot and Interpretation
   a. A chronological account of activities with a friend.
   b. A straight-forward account of play activities.

Mark dictated the following story after viewing two films: *King Midas and the Golden Touch* and *The Monkey Who Would Be King.* The group was encouraged to write a folk tale-like story.

Raymond K. Jung

The Greedy Little King

Once upon a time there was a little king. The king dug a large hole to see is there any gold down here. Then he found a golden man and washed him off and took him downstairs. Then he was so tired that he wanted to take a nap. And then when he was sleeping something would bang.

He ran downstairs to see what was happening. Then he saw a little mouse. The mouse said, "Hey, you. Let me have your gold for some cheese." The little greedy king said, "No." Then the mouse took his rope and threw him out the window. Then the little mouse took all of his gold. Then he took his cat, and the cat ate the mouse.

1. Once upon a time there was a little king. (1 sentence; 1 T-unit; 9 words)
   a. Initial time reference (Once upon a time)
   b. Characterization by adjective in det. +——+ subject noun slot ("a little king")
   c. Human figure as a character in a folk tale
   d. Anticipatory "there" serves as provisional subject
2. The king dug a large hole to see is there any gold down here. (1; 1; 15)
   a. Description by det. +——+ object noun slot ("a large hole")
   b. Infinitive phrase ("to see")
   c. Object of infinitive phrase ("is there any gold down here") (This phrase seems to function as an "if clause")
   d. Adverbial of place ("down here")
3. Then he found a golden man and washed him off and took him downstairs. (1; 1; 14)
   a. Initial adverbial of time ("Then")
   b. Description by adjective in det. +——+ object noun slot ("a golden man")
   c. Adverbial of place ("downstairs")
   d. Double compounding of verb ("found . . . and washed him off . . . and took")
4. Then he was so tired that he wanted to take a nap. (1; 1; 12)
   a. Initial adverbial of time ("Then")
   b. Adverb of degree ("so")
   c. That clause in final position
   d. Infinitive phrase ("to take a nap")

5. And then when he was sleeping something would bang. (1; 1; 9)
   a. Initial adverbial of time ("Then")
   b. Adverbial of time "when clause" following an adverbial of time ("then")
   c. Use of indefinite pronoun ("something")
   d. Use of be + ing in "when clause"
   e. Use of modal (would) in past tense in VP
6. He ran downstairs to see what was happening. (1; 1; 9)
   a. Adverbial of place ("downstairs")
   b. Infinitive phrase
   c. Terminal "what clause" including a be + ing form ("was happening")
7. Then he saw a little mouse. (1; 1; 6)
   a. Initial adverbial of time ("then")
   b. Description by det. +——+ object noun slot ("a little mouse")
   c. Introduction of the first animal character in the folk tale.
8. The mouse said, "Hey you, let me have your gold for some cheese." (1; 1; 13)
   a. Initial utilization of dialogue.
   b. Imperative transformation.
   c. Prepositional phrase ("for some cheese")
   d. Form of address ("Hey you")
   e. Second longest T-unit for mouse's expression
9. The little, greedy king said, "No." (1; 1; 6)
   a. Characterization by adjectives in det. +——+ ——+ subject noun slot ("little, greedy king")
   b. Reference to a moral problem ("greedy")
   c. Brevity of king's reply as compared to the mouse's request, shortest T-unit.
10. Then the mouse took his rope and threw him out the window. (1; 1; 12)
    a. Initial adverbial of time ("then")
    b. Compounding of verb ("took . . . and . . . threw")
    c. Adverbial of place ("out the window")
11. Then the little mouse took all of his gold. (1; 1; 9)
    a. Initial adverbial of time ("then")
    b. Characterization by adjective in det. +——+ subject noun slot
    c. All + prepositional phrase — intensity ("of his gold")

12. Then he took his cat, and the cat ate the mouse. (1; 2; 4 + 6)
    a. Compound sentence, "and", compounding of T-units
    b. Introduction of second animal character
    c. Initial adverbial of time ("then")

Summary of Composition Characteristics:

1. Lengths
    a. 12 sentences total
    b. 13 T-units total
    c. 125 words
    d. 9.5 words/T-unit average
    e. 5 words/T-unit maximum
    f. 14 words/T-unit
    g. 3 consecutive sentences on single subjects; description of king's actions S. 2 - 4; description of mouse's actions S. 10-12
2. Syntax
    a. Subject-verb inversion (1/12)
    b. Subordinate clauses occur in 5/16 sentences:
        (1) "That clause" in final position; "when clause" in medial position, "if clause" in final position, "that clause" in final position, "what clause" in final position
        (2) Length of half of the long sentences comes from subordinate clauses
    c. Compounded verb phrases and adjectives
    d. Adjectives only in det. +——+ noun slots, in either subject or object positions
    e. Syntactic parallelism in functionally parallel sentences (S. 10 - 12)
    f. Co-occurrence of initial adverbials of time and shift in the narrative (6/12)
3. Characters
    a. Characterization by:
        (1) Physical description
        (2) Relationship with an animal
        (3) Visual adjectives (big, little, golden)
        (4) Moral adjective (greedy)
    b. Human and animal characters
    c. Both human and animal characters are characterized by greed

4. Plot or narrative stages
   a. Introduction of human character (S. 1)
   b. Seach for gold by the king (S. 2-4)
   c. Introduction of the first animal character, the mouse (S. 5-7)
   d. Confrontation of king and the mouse (S. 8-10)
   e. Confrontation of the mouse and the cat (S. 11-12)

Comparison of Stories

An examination of the norm characteristics reveals that Pressly and Mark vary considerably in the complexity of their language forms. Mark's story is longer for all the length criteria. The difference in average T-unit span is most striking: 9.5 for Mark as compared with 4.4 for Pressly.

Loban found that 260 first graders in his study spoke an average of 6.05 words per communication unit (2:28). This would indicate that Mark is considerably advanced and that Pressly is far below average in the mean lengths of their T-units. This relative ranking corresponds to their teacher's evaluation of their academic progress.

In respect to syntax, Mark's extensive use of subordinate clauses and adjectives results in lengthened T-units. This is in marked contrast to Pressly's total omission of subordinate clauses and adjectives and shorter T-unit lengths. Mark's utilization of adverbials and nominals also serves to expand his T-unit lengths.

Mark also employs more varied means for developing characterizations. The two stories differ widely in complexity of plot structure. Pressly's story is a straightforward account of play activities with a friend. Mark's story contains five stages which build up to a climax. Although Mark borrowed features from the two films which he viewed prior to writing this story, he incorporated several original ideas to illustrate his main point. The attribute of greed was borrowed from the character of King Midas and applied to the king in the story *and* to an animal character. The quest for gold was also probably borrowed from the Midas story. Mark's utilization of animal characters was probably suggested by *The Monkey Who Would Be King* film story. The two confrontations: greedy king versus greedy mouse and greedy mouse versus cat are original touches. The end result of the two confrontations is the demise of the two greedy characters. Mark has incorporated into his story a moral in the vein of the Perrault fairy tales. The utilization of a previously unintroduced cat provides an abrupt ending to the story.

This examination of dictated stories offers a partial explanation for the differences between Mark and Pressly in academic performance, espe-

cially for those activities which are based primarily on language activities. One implication which might be drawn from Pressly's exclusive reliance upon simple sentence structures is that he might find difficulty in beginning reading materials which contain an extensive number of complex sentences or transformations. The utilization of language experience materials would negate the aforementioned possible problem by relying upon the child's own syntax for beginning reading materials.

The method of analysis reviewed in this paper could serve the classroom teacher in a number of ways. By utilizing this procedure, the teacher should be better able to perceive the language performance of his pupils in written and oral composition in an objective manner using objective data. The comparison of a child's composition at three to five months intervals would reveal growth in the child's acquisition of the expressive resources of the language. This recommended process is time consuming. However, its application two or three times per school year would be enough to yield very beneficial data about the child's language development.

The teacher could use a modified version of this analysis in parent conferences to emphasize the positive aspects of language which the child commands. It could be an excellent means for educating parents about the importance of language growth which is implicitly learned through experiencing life situations and being given many opportunities for expression without direct instruction as opposed to undue concern with the mechanics of spelling and punctuation.

The inclusion of one or two of these analyses by each teacher in the cumulative folder of each child would be a valuable source of information for the pupil's future teachers. A folder of the pupil's compositions would provide a longitudinal record of the child's growth in the use of composition concepts and syntactic structures.

The chief benefit of this analysis procedure is the insights it gives the teacher as to the syntactic performance of his pupils which can help him respond appropriately to its significance. The writer cautions against the use of this method of analysis to "grade" children's compositions. Whipp points the way toward an effective way to responding to children's composition, "We can, with a slight redirection of our time and energies, *use* the language, understand, comprehend, perceive what the language is doing for the child, and work with it *at that level*. Perhaps then we will no longer feel compelled to 'correctness' teaching." (4:50)

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